Plurilingualism in schooling policies: The Brussels melting pot

Katja Lochtman, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Abstract

Brussels is a multilingual and multicultural city at the heart of Europe, where individual plurilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. As far as multilingual language policies in Brussels schools are concerned, the main areas of interests include the status of this plurilingualism and its significance for social inclusion in Brussels education and more broadly, for European integration and social cohesion in the capital of Europe. This paper addresses these issues on the basis of a pilot study on language policy in two European schools and two publicly-funded schools in Brussels. Drawing upon the interview data with a few language teachers, the paper presents the perceived unique advantages of having plurilingual learners in class or across school. It also highlights that besides the concern about social inclusion and respect for other cultures, special attention should be paid to finding ways of drawing upon the language knowledge pupils bring with them to the classroom.

Keywords: Brussels, European schools, plurilingual learners

Abstract

Brüssel ist eine multilinguale und multikulturelle Stadt im Herzen Europas, wo individuelle Mehrsprachigkeit eher die Norm als die Ausnahme ist. Was die mehrsprachige Sprachenpolitik an den Schulen in Brüssel anbelangt, so ist der Status dieser Mehrsprachigkeit und ihre Bedeutung für die soziale Inklusion und im weiteren Sinne für die europäische Integration von besonderem Interesse. In diesem Beitrag werden diese Fragen auf der Grundlage einer Pilotstudie zur Sprachenpolitik an zwei europäischen Schulen und zwei öffentlich finanzierten Schulen in Brüssel behandelt. Basierend auf den Interviewdaten mit einigen Sprachlehrern werden die Vorteile von mehrsprachigen Lernenden im Unterricht oder in der Schule dargestellt. Hervorgehoben dabei wird auch, dass neben der Sorge um die soziale Eingliederung und die Beachtung anderer Kulturen besondere Aufmerksamkeit darauf gerichtet werden sollte, Wege zu finden, das Sprachwissen zu nutzen, das die Schüler mit in den Unterricht bringen.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Brüssel, europäische Schulen, mehrsprachige Lernende

1. Introduction

Brussels is the multilingual and multicultural capital both of Belgium and of Europe. It could therefore be expected that as far as language education is concerned, the European ideal of unity in diversity features in the Brussels publicly funded schooling system. Despite its multilingual and multicultural learning environment, official education in Brussels, however, does not seem to have made full use of this available and potential richness and consequently maintains the separation between the so-called 'monolingual' Dutch-speaking and French-speaking schools. Language and schooling policy in Brussels opts for immersion for the foreign language speakers in the mainstream, i.e. the school language. As a result, plurilingual immigrant children often have lower achievements at school and have concomitantly no or low levels of literacy in their home language. The question that arises

relates to the influence such individual plurilingualism will have on social inclusion in Brussels' education. According to Little (2016, p. 174), linguistic, cultural and ethnic inclusivity is a basic condition for any attempt to implement 'plurilingual education'. This would entail that "all home languages present in the school are explicitly acknowledged" (ibid), which necessarily requires "creativity, ingenuity and a great deal of negotiation to accommodate the 40 or more home languages that are often present in schools in multilingual cities" (ibid).

There is one type of schooling in Brussels, however, where the European ideal of unity in diversity successfully features in their (language) education policy: the European schools. These schools can be seen as a micro-cosmos of the EU and they are known for being the examples of good practice, when it comes to the application of the European Councils' language policy. The European Commission promotes multilingual education, also referred to as *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (hereafter CLIL). In these schools, individual plurilingualism, social inclusion and home language maintenance are at the core of their language policy. The languages concerned are all EU-languages, which, in the European schools, all enjoy equal status.

To gain an insight into the schooling and language policies in Brussels, we conducted a pilot study in two European schools (Maréchal, 2017) and two publicly-funded schools (one French-speaking and the other Dutch-speaking), both of secondary education. The premise was that the language policy in the European schools clearly exemplifies the European policy on language education, reflecting an elitist status. This language policy was compared with that of the Brussels publicly-funded schooling system to determine the extent to which the European ideal of unity in diversity features in the public schools.

2. Schooling in Brussels

The capital of Belgium is officially bilingual (French and Dutch). Schooling in Brussels is regulated according to the language community the school in question belongs to. This means that the French- and Dutch-speaking community each takes charge of its own educational policy and that a 'bilingual' Brussels education system as such does not exist. The fact that Brussels is an officially bilingual city also implies that, politically, French and Dutch have equal status. In reality, French, however, is the dominating language, although English is increasingly becoming the lingua franca at the universities and in many (international) companies. French is the home language of 56,8% of its inhabitants, and roughly 30% of the 'born-and-bred *Bruxellois*' are Dutch-French bilingual. Nearly 100% of the immigrant population speaks 2 languages or more and the number of bilingual families and home languages is still rising. More than one fourth of Brussels' inhabitants are foreign nationals, 50% of whom are European and 24% of the inhabitants are younger than 20 years old (Janssens, 2013). Table 1 shows a list of the 8 most spoken languages in Brussels and their ranking:

French	88,5 %
English	29,7 %
Dutch	23,1 %
Arabic	17,9 %
Spanish	8,9 %
German	7,0 %
Italian	5,2 %
Turkish	4,5 %

Table 1: the 8 most spoken languages in Brussels (Janssens 2013)

Although French is the most frequently used language in Brussels, knowledge of Dutch has high status (Janssens, 2013). This can be linked to the city's socio-economic development, which has created good career opportunities for French-Dutch bilinguals with a good command of English (Ceuleers et al. 2007). Migrant languages such as Arabic or Turkish tend to have a low(er) status (Janssens, 2013).

The French-speaking school system represents approximately 80% of the Brussels school population while the Dutch-speaking one merely 17%. The remaining percentage is found in the European or international schools for expats resided in Brussels. Nevertheless, the school language does not invariably equal the pupils' home language (Janssens, 2013). In order to ensure the bilingual development (French-Dutch) of their children, many French-speaking parents choose to send their children to Dutch-speaking schools. As Janssens (2013) reports, there has been a striking rise of non-Dutch speakers in Dutch-medium education since 2000, and currently, only a minority of those pupils speak Dutch at home. Moreover, it is a well-known secret that many parents in Brussels prefer to send their children to Dutch-speaking schools because of the over-representation of speakers of migrant languages in the French-speaking school system. This means that all Brussels schools consist of a highly diverse student population, resulting in mixed-language classes. Remarkably, Janssens (2013) also found that these classes are seen as potential enrichment by over 80% of the *Bruxellois*. It remains unfortunate that mainstream education in Brussels does not make deliberate use of this readily available enrichment and maintains the separation between two 'monolingual', i.e. Dutch-speaking and French-speaking school systems, the nature of which is largely political.

3. European language policy and multilingual education or CLIL

Language education policy in the member states of the European Union bears the stamp of that established and elaborated by the European Council. As early as 1995, the European Commission released the *White Paper on Education and Training* with the title: "*Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society".* It lists the key objectives and the main lines of action at the European level envisaged for the years to come. These include: encouraging the acquisition of new knowledge, bringing school and the business sector closer together, combatting exclusion, developing proficiency in three European languages, and treating capital investment and investment in training on an equal basis (p. I). Fundamentally, it was stressed that the development of individual plurilingualism plays a central role in achieving these goals. It was further laid out that every European citizen should be

able to communicate and function in at least three community languages, i.e. the L1 and two foreign languages. In this sense, a distinction was made between productive and receptive language proficiency. Regarding either of the foreign languages, only receptive proficiency was required[1]. Interestingly, the White Paper only referred to "community languages", while no mention was made of migrant languages such as Turkish or Arabic.

In order to achieve these goals, the European Commission promotes one mode of multilingual education, CLIL, which advocates a "dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (Coyle, Hood and Marsh, 2010, p. 1). This means that certain non-linguistic subjects, including history, geography, mathematics and sports, are taught in a foreign language. From this perspective, all teachers are language teachers and the difference between the first language and the second language becomes secondary. Put another way, in CLIL, the language for all children is a foreign language (Dalton-Puffer, 2008, p. 2). In so doing, CLIL would promote social inclusion with much heterogeneity among the pupils.

Since multilingualism could be seen as a route to improve equal opportunities (Reich & Krumm, 2013, p. 91), in CLIL, all the languages of the learners are regarded equivalent in the classroom and perceived as a means of communication. The foreign language is thus not the content, but a medium in the class (de Graaff, 2013) and is learned implicitly. When a topic is described and discussed in that foreign language, the language becomes particularly relevant, reinforcing its authenticity, which, in turn, leads to great advantages in terms of vocabulary acquisition, general language competence and learning speed (de Graaff, 2013, p. 14). Multilingual teaching principles such as heteroglossia (Blackledge & Creese, 2014) and translanguaging (Garcia, 2009, Garcia & Li 2014) play an important role in fostering language awareness (Reich & Krumm, 2013; Lochtman, 2015) in that these perspectives conceptualize languages as social constructs that build up knowledge and identity. For instance, multilingual code switching (or translanguaging) in the classroom will promote not only language acquisition but also the development of other cognitive skills and knowledge in general (Blackledge & Creese, 2014). Translanguaging will also create a social space for multilingual speakers "by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitudes, beliefs and performance" (Wei, 2011, p. 1223). Languages are thus used flexibly and strategically when learners move between different languages without feeling stigmatized on the basis of the status of the languages from a sociolinguistic point of view (Garcia, 2009). All this will then lead to more success stories and to greater self-assurance, which itself is a motivating factor. In the case of CLIL, even the most vulnerable pupils can be empowered to participate in the classroom discussion (Manyak, 2004). Finally, although implicitly, intercultural skills are acquired (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 41). As Hu (2003, p. 300) put, a culture of multilingualism and multiculturalism is being created in a very natural way. CLIL is thus believed to offer several advantages compared with traditional foreign language teaching; it enhances the development or fostering of content knowledge, plurilingualism, pluriculturalism, and social inclusion (Lochtman, 2015). The issue that is of particular relevance in this article is the way in which Brussels classrooms relate to these principles of multilingual education.

[1] http://europa.eu/documents/comm/white_papers/pdf/com95_590_en.pdf: 13, 47-48. (18/09/2017)

4. Plurilingualism in the classroom: Idealism and reality

Brussels is also known as the capital of Europe. Therefore, the European ideal of unity in diversity should also feature in the Brussels publicly funded schooling system in regard to language education. According to the European Commission, the goal of language education should be "the development of fully integrated plurilingual repertoires" (Little, 2016, p. 148). It should seek to cultivate plurilingual individuals in a diverse society. To attain this goal, schools should bear the following responsibilities: "ensure that all pupils become fully proficient in the official language of schooling; provide appropriate language support for pupils whose home language is not the language of schooling; as far as possible foster the literacy of such pupils in their home language; and help all pupils to acquire communicative proficiency in the foreign languages of the curriculum" (ibid). The foreign languages in the Brussels curriculum include French or Dutch, the choice of which depends on the Language Community (see above), and also English, German, Spanish and occasionally Latin. Migrant languages such as Turkish or Arabic are not part of the curriculum. When these two groups of languages are compared, the former enjoys higher status (Janssens, 2013).

Language and schooling policy in Belgium opts for immersion for the foreign language speakers in the mainstream. As a result, immigrant children often have lower achievements at school and have no or low levels of literacy in their home language. Results from the PISA study (2009) on *Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes* (OECD, 2010[2]) showed that in Brussels, language background is one of the most striking predictors of academic achievement, whereby immigrant pupils seriously lag behind their non-immigrant peers, who have one of the two national languages as the L1 (French or Dutch). The major issues in Brussels mainstream education remain the provision of language learning opportunities for immigrants and maintaining the school languages (see also King & Larson, 2016). This means that, even in Brussels, school language policies are cautiously aimed at maintaining one of the national languages, thereby resulting in situations where multilingualism is controlled and sometimes even excluded. Although minority languages and languages of children with a migration background are omnipresent in the classroom, they are not taken into account in mainstream education in Brussels, which reflects a submersive and monolingual school system in which the lessons are organized in the majority language. The students with a migration background are thus exposed to the "sink-or-swim" principle (Cummins, 2009, p. 162). The governments of the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities seem to continue adhering to the "policies based on the assumption that diversity represents a threat to social cohesion rather than a means of allowing pupils to flourish in their academic life, to maintain and develop their personal language repertoires, and to fulfil their full potential as pupils in the complex, heterogeneous space that is the multilingual city"/school (ibid, p. 11-12).

Ironically, language policies that stem from linguistically homogenous learning groups no longer reflect the diverse, heterogeneous and multilingual composition of today's classrooms and contemporary society (Blackledge & Creese, 2014). Monolingual schooling policies, under which the majority language solely dominates, are likely to run the risk of denying the sociocultural identity of the migrant students (Igoudin, 2012). In the meantime, educational projects for immigrant children, where the children are partly taught in the mother tongue, are often difficult to set up and attract funding in that the languages can be enormously diverse and that these languages are not officially

[2] http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2009-results-overcoming-social-background_9789264091504-en (08/03/2017)

recognized in society and are often identified as less prestigious (Yagmur & Extra, 2011). The heterogeneity of the school population in Brussels mainstream education has resulted in the fact that all teachers become de facto language teachers in giving all subjects, with attention paid to the communicative and language-sensitizing process of learning. Indeed, it is widely perceived by teachers that the diversity in Brussels classrooms qualifies them for some kind of CLIL-classrooms (Lochtman, 2015).

One of the main issues in Brussels mainstream education is concerned with creating language learning opportunities for all students, immigrants and Dutch- and French-speakers alike. The major challenge facing teachers is to find ways of utilizing the language knowledge pupils bring with them to the classroom so that "school knowledge (curriculum content) can build on what they already know" (Little, 2016, p. 151). This idea originates from Cummins' (1981) interdependence hypothesis, which holds that "whatever benefits accrue from education in a 'minority' language need not be bought at the cost of underachievement in the 'majority' language" (Little 2016, p. 164). In the same vain, Sierens and Van Avermaet (2013, p. 217) propose 'functional multilingual learning', whereby teachers are supposed to encourage all pupils to use their home language when collaborating with peers, even when the teacher does not know that language. The belief is that "if minority languages are explicitly acknowledged and play a role in informal interaction between pupils, there should be no difficulty in drawing on them in mainstream subject classrooms to contribute to the exploitation of new concepts as they arise in the language of schooling" (Little, 2016, p. 174). Home language maintenance is felt to be vitally important not only for the educational success of pupils from migrant backgrounds but also for successful social inclusion in the school and in society.

5. The European schools in Brussels

Merely 3 % of Brussels' schools are European Schools, which are held by some as a micro-cosmos of the EU. They are known for being the examples of good practice concerning the application of the European Councils' language policy. In line with the practices in the EU institutions, the main working languages in these schools are English, French and German, while all other European languages are considered equal and should be catered for. Life-long learning, individual plurilingualism and respect for the linguistic identity of the pupils are some of the main objectives in education, with multilingualism, respect and intercultural communication being the basic tenets. Heterogeneity or diversity are seen as an advantage, leading to unity (White Paper, 1995). As mentioned earlier, to achieve these goals, the European Commission promotes CLIL as one type of multilingual education. Taking all this into account, one could suggest that the European schools represent the ideal and somewhat elitist context for instructed language learning. Besides, language policy in the European schools is inevitably influenced by the city they are situated in. In Brussels, first French and then English have become the linguae franca in the European schools.

6. A pilot study in Brussels: European schools versus mainstream education

In order to gain a good understanding of the schooling and language policies in Brussels, a pilot study was conducted in two European schools (Maréchal, 2017) and two publicly-funded schools (one French-speaking and the other Dutch-speaking), both of secondary education. The aim was to compare the language policy in two distinctive schooling systems, with the European schools

embodying an elitist status and the public schools representing the European ideal of unity in diversity.

Data were collected on the basis of semi-structured interviews with two language teachers from the European schools and two from mainstream education on the reality of and their dealings with diversity and plurilingualism in their schools. It was hypothesized that the teachers from the European schools have a different view on the role of multilingualism and 'plurilingual education' from their counterparts' in the public schools, since one of the main issues in Brussels publicly funded education is maintaining their own community language (French or Dutch). The interview questions follow thematically structured guidelines, consisting of open-ended questions to elicit as much information as possible from the participants on the reality of plurilingualism in their schools. The interviews were conducted in French, Dutch and also German particularly in the European schools.

Regarding the data analysis, we first transcribed the interviews and then adopted Mayring's (2008) approach to content analysis, i.e. qualitative content analysis (QualCA), and applied a systematic coding protocol. In trying to establish the contextual meaning of what is being said in the interviews, QualCA has an advantage in informing and forming categories (Mayring, 2008). However, QualCA also makes use of ex-ante categories that are derived from the researchers' prior (theoretical) knowledge about the field and the research informants. This deductive category application was used for the qualitative content analysis of the teacher interviews. The two main categories described in this article are based on the interviews with the four teachers and two research questions are formulated accordingly.

Question 1: What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a multilingual and plurilingual student body, either in class or across school?

As the question presents, the main sub-category relates to the advantages and the disadvantages of having plurilingual learners in class or across school. Interestingly, the European school teachers identify only advantages and no disadvantages.

As far as the advantages are concerned, all four participants appear to be convinced that the pupils are more open-minded and more tolerant, and are more open about learning new languages and discovering new or different cultures, thus broadening their horizons. These are undoubtedly recognized by the four participants as a clear advantage. The European school teachers specifically refer to the possibility of comparing different languages in class, which helps the students to develop stronger awareness of other languages as well as of the language learning process. All four participants also highlight the presence of such awareness particularly in plurilingual learners as one of the main advantages for language learning. The two European school teachers add that in such a multilingual environment the students do not see language learning as something compulsory but as a fun activity fostering their communicative competence and mobility. The multilingual environment is also believed to overcome stereotypes and prejudices (Maréchal, 2017).

Only the two teachers from the mainstream education system comment on some disadvantages. For example, they fear a lack of discipline and loss of control in the classroom when pupils speak their own home languages and they do not understand these languages. They also find the formation of language groups in the playground disadvantageous, because such groups are felt to hinder both social inclusion in the school and intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, they are most apprehensive

that a highly diverse and multilingual classroom might compromise the acquisition of the school languages, i.e. French or Dutch. The main stream school teachers express some anxieties that the diversity in their classrooms and schools might pose a potential threat to social cohesion and might lead to a situation where pupils can speak neither their home language nor the school language properly. Again, all these fears do not seem to be shared by the two European school teachers.

Question 2: What impact does the wider multilingual community have on your language teaching?

Both the mainstream and European school teachers reveal that, as a teaching strategy in their language classes, they intentionally build the links between all languages taught in school. They stress the importance of stimulating classroom interaction between pupils. As most European school pupils often already have a multilingual "European" home background, the European school teachers maintain that the school offers the ideal opportunity for the pupils to use their home language with other native speakers of the same language. However, not all pupils are assumed to show a similar language learning aptitude. Individual differences between pupils, which are referred to as intelligence, motivation or eagerness to learn by the two European school language teachers, are largely felt to determine the language learning success and other learning outcomes as well.

Similarly, the two mainstream teachers highlight the importance of social inclusion and respect for other cultures on the one hand and the required attention to language learning opportunities on the other hand. Being confronted daily with an enormously diverse school population with many migrant children and many different home languages, they emphasize that they genuinely put in an effort to make the pupils realize they represent the world and that they are privileged to be in such a culturally diverse classroom. They feel it important to find ways of drawing upon the language knowledge pupils bring with them to the classroom so that "school knowledge (curriculum content) can build on what they already know" (Little, 2016, p. 151), which is supposed to stimulate classroom interaction between pupils. These ideas coincide with Sierens and Van Avermaet's (2013, p. 217) challenging concept of 'functional multilingual learning', whereby teachers should encourage pupils to use their (migrant) home language when collaborating with other pupils, even when the teacher does not know that language. When home languages and cultural identities are explicitly acknowledged in the classroom, not only the educational success of pupils from migrant backgrounds but also successful social inclusion can be fostered in the school and even in society. Interestingly, as the European school teachers do, these two teachers also assert that comparisons should be made with other languages that are taught in school.

7. Plurilingualism in Brussels schooling policies: Is it all about status?

A recent article was published under this title: "City schools have difficulties in organizing multilingual education" in the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard Online* (Cools, 05/09/2017[3]), in which "multilingual education" is a synonym for CLIL. The article described mainstream education in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, without a mention of the European schools, which are considered the exception rather than the norm. It was suggested that children from non-migrant, predominantly monolingual Dutch-speaking families have more chances and are more likely to be successful in

[3] http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20170904_03052769 (05/09/2017)

education than those growing up in a highly diverse and multilingual city where many migrant languages are present. This difference in language environment, socioeconomic background and consequently academic achievement is echoed in mainstream city schools where problems prevail, ranging from a lack of funding, of basic care to that of teachers with appropriate qualifications. The Brussels city is especially believed to have a direct impact on education. This belief "arises from the inescapable fact that implementation is always a local phenomenon. It takes place in institutions whose character derives in large measure from the social, cultural and economic context in which they operate" (Little, 2016, p. 149-150). In practice, schools vary considerably within the same city of Brussels in terms of school size, the number and proportion of immigrant pupils in the school and the range of ethnicities and home languages present.

The two mainstream language teachers from the interviews (see above) indicate that they wish to be better informed about suitable and effective teaching methods, useful forms of teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil-interaction in the classroom and good communication skills, all of which will enable them to face the challenges of diverse multi-/plurilingual city classrooms. Moreover, these two teachers are well aware of the impact of the PISA study conducted in 2009 (OECD, 2010[4]) regarding the results that in Brussels language background is one of the most striking predictors of academic achievement. Immigrant students were found to lag badly behind their non-immigrant peers from monolingual family backgrounds with one of the two national languages as their L1 (French or Dutch). This conclusion alludes to the sensitive role of multilingualism in the context of social deprivation or what Cummins (2006) termed "plurilingualism of the poor". This makes a sharp contrast with the somewhat elitist position of the European schools, where all the conditions seem to be met to provide CLIL education. Unfortunately, the CLIL approach might indeed be more fruitful or successful with the better students and with pupils whose home languages have a higher socio-economic status.

8. Conclusion: A positive outlook on the melting pot

In Brussels, all schooling systems are characterized by a plurilingual and highly diverse student body, a reality that is not always reflected in educational and schooling policies. In mainstream education, language policies still seem to build upon the separation between the so-called 'monolingual' Dutch-speaking and French-speaking schools. It remains common practice that language and schooling policies in Brussels pursue immersion for the foreign language speakers in the mainstream, i.e. the school language, which also suggests the lower status of heritage and migrant languages in education and society. Teachers as well as the governments are concerned about the fact that diversity might represent a threat to social cohesion and that the most central issue should be the acquisition of the school language as an L1 in order for the pupils to achieve academic success.

Brussels education takes place in "institutions whose character derives in large measure from the social, cultural and economic context in which they operate" (Little, 2016, p. 149-150). In Brussels mainstream schools, there seems to be great diversity, and the presence of a wide range of immigrant languages calls for special attention to diversity. In the European schools, there are, however, only speakers of European languages with a higher socio-economic status than immigrant

[4] http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2009-results-overcoming-social-background_9789264091504-en (08/03/2017)

languages. Despite the differences in the distribution of languages, both the mainstream and the European schools regard multilingualism as an asset and yet an exciting challenge. The question, however, remains whether the CLIL approach in publicly funded schools or mainstream education might be more fruitful or successful with pupils whose home languages have a higher socio-economic status.

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